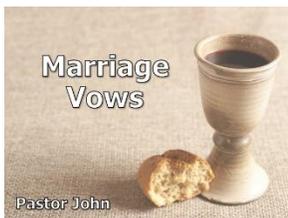


"Marriage Vows"

March 18, 2018

Jeremiah 31: 31-34

³¹ The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. ³² It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt — a covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, says the LORD. ³³ But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. ³⁴ No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, "Know the LORD," for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the LORD; for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more.

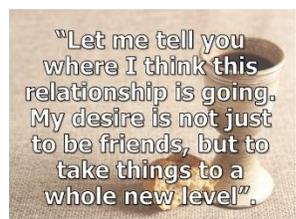


Today we continue our "Covenant" series. Over the course of the past four weeks we have been talking about promises, contracts, and covenants. As we have journeyed through Lent together, we have looked at the differences between these three concepts and have also looked at what distinguishes a covenant from a contract or even a promise. In today's world, when we hear the word 'covenant' we typically think of property covenants that govern land use or that define building restrictions. Today we will spend some time with the prophet Jeremiah as he teaches us more about what our covenant relationship with God should look like. In our passage today, Jeremiah paints a vivid and personal picture of what our covenant with God looks like and feels like when we live it out. Let us pray.

For those of you who are or have been married or even seriously dated, do you remember when you had “the talk” with that person who you thought might possibly be “the one”? As the relationship progressed, at some point you started to wonder just how serious this relationship was. There came a point when you felt you needed to have that relationship-defining conversation. Things needed to be clarified before the relationship could go any further.

In our passage today, Jeremiah is sent by God to have that conversation with the Israelite people. Jeremiah has been identified as the voice of God for the chosen people and, in our passage today, he is writing to them while they are in exile. They have been in Babylon, serving the consequences for their sins. They are still far away physically, but they have again begun to long for a relationship with God. In response, God is preparing to bring them back to their homeland and back into a new relationship with God. Our passage begins today with these words, *“the days are surely coming”*. These words announce that the time has come to redefine the relationship. Through Jeremiah, God says, *“I will make a new covenant”*. This new covenant will not be like the old covenant. It will be different.

In essence, God is saying to the people: *“Let me tell you where I think this relationship is going. My desire is not to just be friends, but to take things to a whole new level”*. For



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most of the adults here today, we have all had this kind of a conversation. Depending on where we thought the relationship was or where we hoped it

might be going, we might be fearful of this conversation or we might be happy to have the conversation because through it we will gain a better understanding of our future and the expectations that the other person has for us.



For the people of Israel, it would have been great news to hear that God was once again at work amongst them. Life in exile is tolerable at best, but it is certainly not ideal. The people are living as captives in a foreign land. The faith they practice runs counter to the polytheistic religion and pagan practices of the Babylonians. So, when God comes to them through the prophet Jeremiah and announces that He not only wants to restore His people, but that He wants to take their relationship to a whole new level, to a more personal and more intimate place, there must have been hope and promise abounding.

Before God defines the new relationship, though, He reminds the people of the old covenant. Let us also take a moment to remember back to the first few covenants that we studied in this series. We began with the covenant made with Noah, in which God promised to never again destroy the earth. In the second covenant, made with Abraham and Sarah, God promised to be their God and to take them in as His people. In the third covenant, the one that is referred to in today's passage from Jeremiah, God gave Moses the Ten Commandments. From our passage today, we get the idea that God saw the beginnings of the need for the Ten Commandments ever since the day that God freed them from slavery in Egypt. In verse 32, God speaks of "*when I took them by the hand to bring them*

out of Egypt". God seems to be implying that a certain level of immaturity was present in the faith of the people. God also reminds the people that they broke the covenant. In this reminder, God identifies himself as the "*husband*" in the relationship. It is an interesting choice of words here. Prior to this point, in general, God is referred to as 'father' when speaking in relational terms. Leading the people by the hand has overtones of this concept of God as the father of the nation Israel. But this shift to the more personal and intimate term 'husband' implies a change in the dynamics of the relationship. This shift brings to mind a covenant like one that might be found in a marriage. Rather than the father-child relationship of the first two covenants, God is seeking a more intense commitment and a deeper, more intimate relationship.

As we continue in Jeremiah 31, God's desire for a more intense commitment is revealed as the passage paints a picture of a God who is hopelessly in love with His people. Instead of defining the relationship by writing the laws on some stone tablets like He did with Moses, God will now write the Law within them, saying, "*I will write it on their hearts*". God then reiterates the idea that we first heard in the covenant with Abraham – promising to be their God and identifying the Israelites as "His people". Earlier we talked about having "the conversation". God is now moving past the dating and even the courtship stages into the nitty gritty of nailing down the details of the new relationship. God desires for the relationship to be absolutely exclusive, much like the arrangement we enter into through our marriage vows. From this perspective, we see that God using the term 'husband' is very appropriate for the new relationship that He is establishing



with His chosen people. God does not want them to continue to try and follow the Jewish religion with all its rules and guidelines. Instead, God desires a deep and personal relationship where the tenants of the relationship are written on the hearts of the people, not on a piece of paper or on some stone tablets. Before we continue any further, I want you to think for a moment: how is God written upon your heart? When others see you, how do they see God in you?

Maybe you had a hard time answering that question. Today, for us and for many people, it can be easy to see our faith in God as our religion or as a set of rules that we try and follow. Because of this, religion can be a term that admittedly has some negative connotations to it. People will often say, "I have faith", preferring that over trying to explain what their religion is all about. But the funny thing is that 'religion' was not originally about rules. The word 'religion' originally comes from the Latin word *religare*, which means "to connect, to bind together". The original term spoke of relationship, not rules. My faith or your faith or our relationship with God was never intended to be about falling in line with some set of rules or with a proper way of thinking. What faith and what community and what this relationship are all about is not about falling in line, but it is about falling in love.



To illustrate the difference between falling in line and falling in love, let us look for a few minutes at the time when a couple takes their wedding vows. When a couple stands up in the front of the church

and takes their marriage vows, they should have a solid understanding of what it means when they say those vows. To a degree, the vows are about how we “do” marriage. But the words are more than just rules to follow. The vows also come with an intent or a feeling attached. Both the bride and the groom should have a firm grasp on what it means when they say words like ‘for richer or poorer’ and ‘in sickness and in health’ and when they promise to be faithful as long as they both shall live. Both the husband and the wife should know that these words have real implications and that they had better be said and believed from deep within the heart and soul.



Marriage vows are serious stuff and that is the type of relationship that God is seeking with us, His people, when He writes His law upon our hearts. We are being invited into a deep commitment to love and honor and cherish God forever. And this relationship is not just about words either. The relationship has to have some action and some engagement to it as well. The signs of the relationship have to be visible and recognizable and must be tangible as well. Last week, the third GPS question began with this statement: “We are each created in Christ Jesus for good works”. Good works are just one way that our relationship with God is visible and tangible. The GPS question went on to ask these two questions: “What good work is God calling you to this week? How will it serve someone in need?” Did any of you wrestle with this question over the past week? Did your wrestling lead to action? And if it did, would you be willing to share the story of the good work that God worked through you? It is

important to share, because when we hear how God has been working in each other's lives, then we begin to see how God can work in all of our lives.

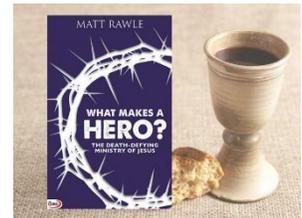


As a child, I would sometimes get in trouble for teasing or hitting or picking on my little brother. Sometimes I would genuinely feel sorry for hurting David or his feelings. In those times, my apology would be sincere and heartfelt. But I did not always feel sorry. Every once in a while, I did not feel sorry for what I did. But you know what, that did not seem to matter too much to my parents. What happened next was always the same: say you're sorry. I would then spit out a flat and detached *"I'm sorry"*. I am guessing that most of you know what came next. Yes, some form of *'say it like you mean it'* always came next. Then I would have to muster up a more convincing apology that I would deliver to the best of my ability. We'd dance the dance and then we'd return to life as if the offense had never occurred. This was the kind of dance that God and the Israelites had been doing when God sent word through Jeremiah that a new covenant was in order. To a degree they knew that they had been mostly going through the motions. Deep down, they really knew why they ended up in exile in Babylon.

At times I think we dance the dance too, don't we? At times our faith can become more about going through the motions than about being in an intimate, personal relationship with God. To help us understand what it means to be involved instead of just being present, please allow me this illustration. *[I will thoroughly enjoy a piece of cake and will share how awesome it tastes and*

smells and even feels in my mouth.] Yes, you were present for the consumption of the piece of cake. But for me, the presence was at a whole other level. I was engaged and involved and committed. In a similar, deeply personal and intimate way, God wants to write His ways upon our hearts. God wants to be involved in our lives at the deepest possible level.

While God wants to be involved daily in all of the details of our lives, we must also understand the bigger picture of how God is at work in our lives and in the world around us. In our Lenten small group study this week, author Matt Rawle makes the observation that sometimes in life we have to step back a bit to see the bigger picture. When we do, we can see the beauty of what God is doing in our lives or in the world. Seeing the big picture of God's story in the Bible and in our lives are both vital to our faith. Rawle writes, "Words are like brushstrokes. If you get too close to a painting, the brushstrokes mean little. But take a step back and consider the brushstrokes together; they reveal something greater than themselves". This parallels the times that God has touched our lives as we have walked our journey of faith. Each little touch of God is like a small brush stroke. We do not always see the cumulative effect of all the times that God has touched our lives. We see the same thing when we begin to take in the whole of God's Word. As we begin to understand the cumulative story of Jesus, we see that God's words point to a truth beyond themselves. Rawle writes, "Jesus' life, suffering, death, and resurrection are the brushstrokes of God's masterpiece".





When we understand the life of Jesus and feel His call upon our lives, we begin to live as a part of that masterpiece.

When we do so, Jesus becomes part of who we are and we

begin to reflect Jesus to others. God's ways become written

upon our heart as God becomes involved in our lives at a deep level. When this happens, we fall in love with God and we come to know Him intimately. When our faith lives in this place, others can see God and His love in us. It is from this place that we begin to answer the question from earlier: When others see you, how do they see God in you?

Being in love with God truly pleases God. It is then that we are the light that draws others to faith. That light naturally radiates from us. What God wants, more than our hard work or even more than our obedience, is that when someone comes close to us, that they can tell, that they can see, that can smell, that they can taste that we have been close to God. What God wants is for people to look at us and to be able to see that God's ways are written upon our hearts, that we intimately know the Lord, and that we are indeed His people. That is the level of relationship that God desires to have with you and me. That is the covenant relationship that God desires for each of us to live within. As we leave here this week, I want you to leave thinking about how people see and hear and sense and maybe even taste and smell God in your life. God desires to be that deeply embedded in who and what we are. How will others experience God in you this week? Let us pray.

GPS – Grow, Pray, Serve

- 1) As you have grown in your faith, how have God's ways and laws become more and more written upon the tablets of your heart?
- 2) In what areas or segments of your life could God gain a better grasp?
Spend some time in prayer this week seeking a willing and humble heart.
- 3) In serving the Lord this week, how will others see, hear, sense, taste, and smell God in your life?